

A group of women are participating in a Women's March in Pakistan. They are holding various protest signs and a large red banner. The signs include "GIRLS JUST WANNA WALK HOME", "I MARCH", "WALK HOME", "انقلاب بن داڑھی کارل مارکس", "ہم چاہے گمراہ نہیں", "2021", and "عورت آزادی مارچ". The women are wearing face masks and some are holding megaphones. The banner in the foreground has the text "عورت آزادی مارچ" and "2021" written on it.

# *Mera Jism Kiski Marzi?*

An Ethnographic Understanding of the Aurat  
(Women's) March in Pakistan

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**DISCLAIMER**



# Motive (Exhibit Layer)

پاکستان کی سڑکوں پر بے شرمی کی انتہا  
عورت مارچ یا بے غیرت مارچ؟



# Motive (Scholarly Layer)

- *Very recent, no scholarly work*
- *Most comprehensive analysis of the feminist movement in Pakistan:*  
*Ayesha Khan - The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy. Published in 2018.*
- *Extreme difference of opinions even within same households etc*

# Method: An Ethnographic Sensibility

- Herzog and Zacka, 2017

- **Epistemic**: uncovering the nature of situated normative demands
- **Diagnostic**: diagnosing obstacles encountered when responding to these demands
- **Evaluative**: evaluating practices and institutions against a given set of values
- **Valuational**: probing, questioning and refining our understanding of values
- **Ontological**: uncovering underlying social ontologies
- “Perspectival duality”

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# Data

- *27 interviews*
- *1 - 1.5 hours each*
- *Confidential*
- *Gender Distribution*
- *Socioeconomic: Lower (less than 50k), Middle(50k-2 lac), Upper(3 lac)*
- *Age Distribution: mostly 20-40 yo*

# The Problem of Representation

A woman wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and a green headscarf with a floral pattern is holding a light blue protest sign high above her head with both arms. The sign has handwritten text in black and purple ink. The background is a clear blue sky.

HERE FOR THE  
WOMEN  
WHO AREN'T ALLOWED  
TO  
MARCH

Who gets to speak for whom?

## Evaluative

- What practical phenomena it refers to and why, given the context, it is the case that representation might not be considered ideal.

## Epistemic

- Based on my interviews, whether or not people find this criticism compelling.

# Valuational

- Historical and scholarly context of the normative question
- My Claim
- Objections to my response
- Response to the objections

# Historical and scholarly context

- In Pakistan:
  - **Ayesha Khan** - *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy*
- Historical movements: Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Morocco
- Common themes: Post-colonial nation-building, Class politics, Islam, Citizenship
- At the global level:
  - **Susan Okin** - *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*
  - **Lila Abu Lughod** - *Against Universals: The Dialects of (Women's) Human Rights and Human Capabilities*
- At a local level (Egypt):
  - **Nabawiyya al Musa** (Lower middle class)
  - **Qasim Amin** (Upper class, aristocratic family)
  - **Huda Shara'awi** (Upper class, founder of EFU)

## My Normative Stance

Claim: Women have the right to be radical and provocative in order to voice their own suffering, regardless of socio-economic class privilege, even if it's not the most effective way to help the underprivileged. They get to speak for *themselves*.



## My Normative Stance - Defense

Sara Ahmed - *Feminism is Sensational*.

*“Finding feminism can be empowering as it is a way of reinhabiting the past. It is personal. There is no question: it is personal. The personal is structural... An individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. His violence is justified as natural and inevitable: that is structure... A structure is an arrangement, an order, a building; an assembly.”*



## My Normative Stance - Defense

Alison Jaggar - Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology

*“Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our ‘gut-level’ awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger.”*

## Objection to my view (Interviews)

1. Not addressing the “real issues” - **irrelevant**
2. Radicalizing the discourse at the expense of the less privileged - **irresponsible**
3. Alienating the lower class - **exclusive**
4. Spreading vulgarity and unIslamic values in society - **indecent**

## Objection to my view (Interviews)

### **Overarching objection:**

Someone's voicing of their own pain is causing pain to others.

The classic harm principle.

# Response to Objections

First line of defense:

- The people who raise this concern are themselves from the privileged class
- Ad Hominem Fallacy - Discrediting the sensational experience of women based on class.
- Empirical counterexamples - suffering of women from higher socioeconomic class

# Response to Objections

Second line of defense:

Argument based on ethnographic sensibility

## Subject 003

### *Demographics:*

- *30 yo, married,*
- *higher socioeconomic, recognized herself as upper middle class,*
- *educated till Masters, planning to pursue PhD*
- *Happy marriage*

## Subject 003

*“You see for the nikkah you sign a paper, the way you sent me a confidentiality form and I signed it right? And before I signed it and even after I signed it before recording you confirmed: are you going to sign this paper willingly? The nikkah is not a casual thing, your parents sit you down and ask you, they ask your permission that if you sign this now you are responsible for your own wellbeing. Then after signing this you are giving this right to the man, your husband, after that if he wants to engage in any kind of activity with you then there’s nothing wrong with it. Then if the woman denies him, that is a sin.”*

## Subject 023

### *Demographics:*

- *22 yo, married,*
- *lower socioeconomic, (10k per month in a house of 4)*
- *educated till 1st grade*
- *Abusive husband*



## Subject 023

*“I get angry but he still forces me... Yes it makes me feel bad, I get so angry I start wishing I could kill him or myself, when I don't feel like (having sex) but he still forces me then I don't feel like doing anything anymore. And then I have to hear things like if I can't touch you then should I go out and find someone?”*

*“Once my mother-in-law also told me that keep your husband satisfied, don't let him go outside... if he goes outside then it must be the wife's fault for not letting him do something”*

## Subject 016

### *Demographics:*

- *29 yo, married,*
- *lower socioeconomic, (used to be 30k per month, but 8k in the pandemic)*
- *educated till 7th grade*
- *Abusive husband*

## Subject 016

*Q. Do you think the approach is too provocative and radical?*

*“The world works on aggression, it’s not like you could talk politely, politely no one will listen. Only anger will make them listen. So it’s good, however it is happening it’s good... We can’t do this ourselves so if they voice our frustrations and bitterness we will like it as well.”*

*Q. Do you feel dissatisfied that these rich elite women are claiming to speak on behalf of women like you?*

*“No they should speak up for sure, it’s possible that maybe through them our concerns will be heard as well. That’s why they should continue to speak up, because they have the money to do everything, and us poor ones without the means will get benefited as well...”*

*Q. Do you think they are “spreading vulgarity” and engaging in indecent behaviour?*

*“No, no, that’s not true. Even if these women don’t say anything, vulgar things are happening anyway, so it’s okay if they are speaking, speaking for their rights so they should fight. What’s vulgar about that?”*

## Conclusion

1. Personal history and experience appears to have a more significant role in supporting the March than socioeconomic class or level of education
2. My claim: it is morally justified to voice one's own suffering.
3. Strongest, most certain takeaway - In answering such normative questions, people OUGHT to conduct empirical, ethnographic research.

# Future Directions

Themes that require further exploration

- Appeal to religion to both discredit and legitimize the movement (Zia ul Haq)  
- cross generational analysis
- Family Laws - Sharia and Tribal justice
- Role of the transgender community - visibility and safety
- In-fighting
- Language - discourse of ally-ship/solidarity or retaliation
- Colonialism, nationalism and imperialism
- Nature of political movements and public demonstrations

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